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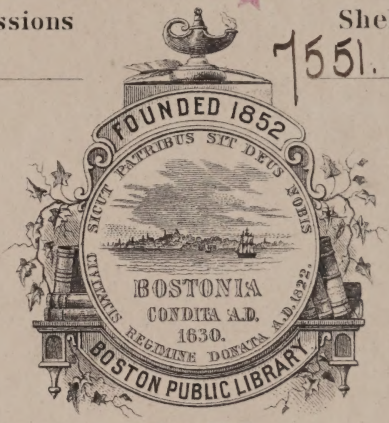

FROM THE

Pierce Fund.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED AT THE

DEDICATION

OF THE

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UNIVERSALIST MEETING-HOUSE,

IN CAMBRIDGE-PORT,

ON WEDNESDAY, DEC. 18, 1822.

BY HOSEA BALLOU,
Pastor of the 2d Universalist Society in Boston.

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and drinking before the Lord, who not only requires but accepts this kind of devotion, we are led to view that Being, who is the object of these religious services, as one, who not only designs the best good of his creatures, but as one who employs the wisest means to promote his gracious designs. As often as these religious feasts occurred, the congregation of the commonwealth of Israel were privileged with an opportunity of realizing the goodness of the dispenser of all needful favors, and at the same time of cultivating and improving their acquaintance with each other by which their social affections were reciprocated and strengthened.

In these solemn and joyful assemblies the twelve tribes would be led to forget any local prejudices, which an absence from each other had permitted to germinate, while the social affections would be called into action by all those natural means by which they are excited. But that which mostly contributed to unite that ancient people, and to render their religious convocations of special interest, was the condescension of the Divine Being in choosing to place his name among them.

In applying this subject to the happy occasion which has invited this solemn and joyful assembly, the following particulars will be briefly noticed.

1. The true doctrine of the divine name, the establishment of which in a certain place consecrates and renders it a proper place for religious assemblies and the solemn exercises of divine worship.

2. The true nature and spirit of devotion: and

3. The design or object to be promoted by the worship of God.

The true doctrine of the divine name is thus expressed; Exodus 34. "The Lord, the Lord God,

merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty."

It will not be necessary, at this time, and on this occasion, to be particular in setting forth the meaning of the words *Lord* and *God*, as it is well known these words signify the possessor and ruler of all things, who alone is worthy of supreme worship; but what seems to be of special importance is, that we understand the nature of those attributes which are attached to the words, *Lord God*, and their due agreement. The attribute of mercy is most strongly expressed as follows: "Merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." Hear this, O sinful man, and let the goodness of God lead thee to repentance! Stronger language could not have been used to express God's fixed, unchangeable favor towards sinners. Here let it be distinctly understood, that the true name of the Lord God can never be separated from that divine mercy which forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin. Any doctrine, therefore, which excludes the sinner from the favor and forgiveness of God is opposed to the name of the Lord, and renders any place unfit for the convocation of those, who would approach their God, thro' the mediation of Jesus, to obtain the remission of sin. The law dispensation and the temple worship were true figures of the gospel, and that spiritual worship of which the Saviour spake to the woman of Samaria. But the legal covenant made no provision for the worship of a people who had no sin; for they found the way to the sanctum sanctorum of their temple, where the sacred NAME was deposited, through the

medium of that blood which made an atonement for their sins; nor is the spiritual worship of the true tabernacle ever offered until by the blood of the everlasting covenant the conscience is purged from dead works to serve the living God.

But my christian brethren, let us, with a godly jealousy cautiously avoid the awful error; an error which has constituted a leading doctrine of an apostatized church for ages, the error of supposing, that the atonement which a merciful God designed as a commendation of his love to man, was designed to reconcile himself to the objects of his grace. This error has defiled the christian sanctuary, polluted the name of the Father of Mercies, converted the God of boundless love into a Moloch, and the christian church into the mother of harlots, drunk with the blood of saints! Let it be kept in mind, that the name of the Lord is established by that doctrine which acknowledges him to be "merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin."

It is essential to the nature of God to forgive sin, for God is love, and love always forgives. This doctrine is clearly maintained by the commands of the Saviour, in which it is enjoined on us to forgive those who transgress against us; and we know this is the never failing dictate of the spirit of God within ourselves, when we are guided by it; and it should be deemed an egregious error for professed christians to allow themselves to believe that they are more ready to forgive the faults of their fellow sinners, than he is, whose grace hath forgiven them, and whose spirit alone can lead them to forgive others. We must furthermore consider it a fault to be lamented in the con-

duct of the pious of many denominations, that they fervently pray for the forgiveness of all men, while they pertinaciously maintain a creed that excludes millions of the subjects of their prayers from the mercy for which they ask!

But while we cautiously and gratefully maintain and defend the sacred NAME, as displayed in the doctrine of divine forgiveness, we must not forget the attribute of retributive justice, which is as strongly expressed in our quotation from Exodus 34th, as is that of mercy and forgiveness. The truly awful words in which this subject is expressed, are the following:— "And that will by no means clear the guilty." Hear these words, O sinful man, and tremble! That God, whose all pervading eye beholds our very thoughts, and from whom our most secret designs cannot, for one moment, be hid, has declared that it is essential to his very NAME, in no wise to clear the guilty! Nothing less can be meant by these words than that God will, without fail, in all instances, punish the transgressor according to his criminality. My friends, I beseech you to realize this fact, this solemn truth, that the Lord God, who is merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin, will by no means clear the guilty; but will render to every man according to the fruit of his doing.

This doctrine of retributive justice will enable us to correct another injurious error, which has been imbibed in the christian church, and consists in a belief, that the wicked may spend many years in sin, and finally go clear of punishment, by repenting just before they die. This most injurious and demoralizing error has combined with itself another mistake, which is necessary to its support which contends that God does not punish the sinner in this mortal state. By

setting up and establishing these errors, the wisdom of this world has systematically profaned the NAME of the Lord. If during this mortal life sin be not punished, nor punished hereafter, if repented of before death, then it is evident that by means of repentance the Lord God clears the guilty; but he declares that he will by no means clear the guilty.

Another important error of the church, which the true doctrine of God's NAME, as manifested in his retributive justice, will assist us in correcting, is the supposition that Jesus Christ suffered the punishment due to the sins of an elected number of the human race, so that by means of his sufferings these sinners are cleared. Compare this with the divine declaration, "that will by no means clear the guilty." According to the doctrine under consideration, none of those things, which have been held up as means by which sinners may be saved from the punishment which they deserve, were ever designed for that purpose; for God says, he will by *no means* clear the guilty. The mediation of Christ, faith in him, nor the most sincere repentance was ever designed, by our Father in heaven, as means to clear the guilty.

If the opinion of christian doctors, who contend that sin is an infinite evil and deserves an endless punishment, were true, then it would follow, of course, that God must either clear the guilty, or banish all men from his favor forever. But this opinion is supported by no other authority than the precepts of men.

Is it asked, how the doctrine of the divine NAME, as manifested in the forgiveness of iniquity, and transgression, and sin, is reconciled with the manifestation of the same divine NAME, in the punishing of every transgressor, according to the turpitude of his guilt? God gives the answer—"If his children forsake my

law and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments: then will I visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquities with stripes; nevertheless my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail—The Lord will not cast off forever: but though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies; for he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men—Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat, and they draw near unto the gates of death. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saveth them out of all their distresses—Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy; for thou renderest to every man according to his work." God punishes the guilty as a father chastiseth his disobedient son, whom he loveth. My friends, the principle for which I am now contending is one on which all wise and good parents practice with their children. The tender affections of a parent's heart are by no means inconsistent with that discipline, which carefully looks into every motive by which the heart of the child is actuated, and reproves, rebukes and inflicts according to the degrees of guilt which an impartial investigation is able to discover.

According to the errors which professed christians have imbibed, they have considered themselves as the subjects of the divine forgiveness; but those who do not subscribe to their creed, they view as the guilty, whom the Lord will in no wise clear. Hence arises the complacency which they manifest while they talk of the righteous and the wicked. They are the righteous, and their neighbors are the wicked. They read

the testimony, which informs us that the wicked shall be punished ; but they are no otherwise affected by this, than as they are affected by some calamity which they are informed some people in a far country may experience ; they do not so much as think of themselves. It is now, and among us, my christian brethren, the great and the main question, which is agitated against the doctrine of the divine impartiality, when and where are the wicked to be punished? Thousands and thousands are now standing by themselves and thanking God that they are not like other men ; the case would be vastly different if we had that true sense of ourselves, which would lead us to smite our breasts and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

The attributes of the divine NAME, which consecrated a place for religious devotion, under the legal economy, are, in the christian dispensation, manifested in the great apostle and high priest of our profession, to whom the eternal Father hath *given a name* which is above every name, that in his name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. But this name, as revealed in Jesus, displays a glory which was but faintly shadowed under the law; for Jesus "hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Hear this, O dying man, and lay hold of the hope which is set before us, which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, and entering into that within the vail, where our forerunner hath for us entered.

A house of worship, dedicated to this name, which is above every name, and set open for the sacred ministry, which displays, in their most obvious and glorious light, the attribute of divine mercy in

the forgiveness of iniquity, transgression and sin, and the justice of God, in a system of retribution, which renders to every man according to his doings; and which proclaims a risen and glorified Redeemer as the head of every man, in whom God has given to all men life and immortality, is a proper place for a christian assembly to feast on the fruits of the spirit, and to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.

2dly. The true nature and spirit of devotion next claims our particular attention.

It seems reasonable to suppose, that the feast set forth in our text is a suitable figure to represent the true nature and spirit of christian worship.

Almighty God abundantly blessed his people in the fruits of their lands, giving them corn, oil and wine, and multiplied their flocks and herds; and he required of them that they should honor him by collecting the tithes of his bountiful providence, and bringing them together to the place where he established his name, and there eat these good things before the Lord. Thus the acceptable worship of God consisted in feasting his people on the good gifts which he had bestowed upon them. The christian, who worships God in spirit and in truth, well knows the application of this figure. Almighty God blesses his church with the abundant incomes of the fruits of his spirit, which are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance, and with these fruits he requires us to honor him in our devotions. It was not to make the Lord kind to his people that they were directed to feast, with joy and gladness, before him; but it was because he had already blessed them, and because this feast itself was one of the greatest blessings they enjoyed. Thus it is with the christian congregation;

we worship God in spirit and in truth, not expecting thereby to induce our bountiful Father in heaven to bestow on us his favors, but because we already enjoy them, and because the solemn exercises of devotion constitute our most exquisite pleasures. Nor do we, when guided by the spirit of truth, vainly offer to the Lord our devotions, expecting thereby to pacify his wrath and disarm his vengeance, which a disordered imagination supposes are burning against us; but realizing the true doctrine of the divine name, we offer our grateful devotions to him, who is gracious and merciful, who forgives our iniquities, transgression and sin, through the mediation of him who hath loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.

Our heavenly Father requires nothing of us, but for our own comfort and edification; and as it could not be well pleasing to one of us, who is a father, to see his children approach his table with horror, with dread, with fear and trembling, and eat and drink for no other purpose than to appease his wrath, so it cannot be consistent with the divine spirit, for us to adhere to those sentiments which induce devotions corresponding with such horrible fears.

The entertaining exercises of that religion which is well pleasing to God, are represented in the scriptures by several emblems which are worthy of our careful notice. Looking forward to the day of the Messiah's grace, the prophet Isaiah represented the sentiments of divine truth as follows; "And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast." It is evident that the gospel dispensation was in the prophet's mind, when he delivered this testimony, for if his views had been limited by the separating wall which divided the Jews and the

gentiles, the feast would have been made for Jew, but not for gentile. But Jesus hath broken down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, that of the twain he might make, in himself, one new man.

A feast made by our heavenly Father for all people cannot be designed to reconcile him who makes the feast to those for whom it is made; nor can this feast be composed of sentiments which exclude any from its blessings. The same prophet, stimulated by the quickening energies of the nourishing qualities of this feast, exclaims as follows; "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money: come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labor for that which satisfieth not? Harken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness."

As other emblems of this divine repast, the same prophet speaks of rivers of waters in dry places, streams in deserts, and pools in parched ground. All these beautiful representations are realized in Jesus, who declared himself to be the bread of God, which came down from heaven to give life to the world; and who said that the water which he should give should so satisfy, that those who drank of it should never thirst.

In view of Jesus, in this extensive character, we understand his testimony, in which he says; "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me"; in which declaration he speaks of the fulfilment of the words of Isaiah, who said; "And it shall come to pass, in the last days, that the moun-

tain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it."

The spirit of the christian religion, and that which leads the devotions of the sanctuary, is unfeigned gratitude to our merciful Father in heaven, who graciously forgives our iniquities, transgressions and sins; and who never fails to administer those salutary chastisements, which, in his hand, are means of grace, mercy and peace; and who has endowed his holy child Jesus with power to bring life and immortality to light through the gospel; and a lively active benevolence towards all mankind, as the offspring of our universal Parent, who is equally good unto all, and whose tender mercies are over all his works. Under the influence of this spirit, and in the enjoyment of this feast, which God hath made in Sion for all people, a christian assembly presents, in the exercises of devotion, the most pleasing and delightful entertainment that our imagination can conceive.

Where parents and children, neighbors and friends, the old and young, assemble to confess their sins and realize the mercy of a pardoning Redeemer, to offer prayers in faith for all needed favours, to feast their hopes with the bright prospect of immortal glory, and to offer anthems of praise to the giver of every good and perfect gift; while all the social affections are warmed and strengthened, we may justly call such a place an heavenly place in Christ Jesus. Of such a place, the pious Watts, expressing the sentiment of the sweet singer of Israel, says;

"I've seen thy glory and thy power
Through all thy temple shine;
My God, repeat that heavenly hour,
That vision so divine.

Not all the blessings of a feast
Can please my soul so well,
As when thy richer grace I taste
And in thy presence dwell."

3dly. We are to speak af the design or object to be promoted by the public worship of God.

This is definitely expressed in the last member of our text, as follows: "That thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always."

In order to obtain correct views of this most important subject, it seems necessary in the first place to understand what is meant by the fear of the Lord. This fear is not that slavish dread, which too many deluded minds entertain, by erroneously supposing that our heavenly Father is a tyrant, destitute of that goodness, which renders him the proper object of our supreme love and confidence, but it is that fear which love and confidence produce in the mind. We who are parents ought to understand this principle perfectly; for without it, it is impossible to govern our offspring to their advantage. If our children are taught to fear to disobey us, because they realize our love and affection for them, their fear will be a safe defence against transgression, while at the same time it is both honorable and pleasing to us. But what parent would wish to see the dear objects of his affections, filled with a slavish fear, standing and trembling, as if their lives were every moment in danger, from the uplifted hand of his vindictive vengeance?

The Apostle John has very justly disposed of this kind of fear, by informing us, that he that feareth is not made perfect in love, and that love casteth out fear. But love does not cast out the fear of the Lord, but induces it. This is that fear of the Lord, which the wise man said is the beginning of wisdom, and which he further describes as follows: "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil."

Too many misguided souls have erroneously mistaken this subject, and preposterously supposed that they were exercised with the true fear of the Lord, while all they feared was what their kindest benefactor might do to them! They learn to dread and to hate what they are taught to fear that God may do to them; but they neglect to learn the true fear of the Lord, which is to hate evil.

Having this rational and scriptural understanding of what the fear of the Lord is, let us next observe that this fear may be learned by a due attention to the ordinances of christian devotion.

Mankind are naturally as capable of learning to fear and love God as they are to learn any science whatever. Let youth accompany their parents to the sanctuary of devotion, and let the true doctrine of the divine name be set forth in the light of the gospel of our Redeemer; let the odious nature of iniquity, transgression and sin be undisguisedly set before them; let the tongue of deceit and temptation, which endeavours to persuade the simple, that stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant, be silenced, and its folly exposed; let the loveliness of virtue & the true fear of the Lord be presented to the understanding; and let this be practised continually, and youth will learn, and the scripture which saith; "They that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God, they shall bring forth fruit in old age," will be abundantly verified.

Christian friends and brethren, who have cheerfully and willingly offered of your substance to erect this beautiful and convenient house for the public worship of our common Father in heaven, may I be indulged, not only in my own behalf, but in behalf of my ministering brethren, to congratulate you, for the good success, which has attended your laudable and praise worthy exertions. Our eyes have been towards you, while our prayers have ascended to him, without whose aid, they that build the house labor in vain. And this day brings us to the mutual enjoyment of reciprocating our best and most refined affections, while bowing before the sacred name, and dedicating this fruit of your labours and expenses as a nursery for your families and the rising generation, in the wisdom, love, knowledge and true fear of the Lord.

Brethren, may all your hopes be realized, and may the ministry of reconciliation prosper within these walls, to the honour of God, and to the comfort of multitudes for many generations to come.